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In My View

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IN MY VIEW . . .

“Desert Shield and Strategic Sealift”: A “Few Points”

Sir,

The essay on “Desert Storm and Strategic Sealift” by Gibson and Shuford appearing in the Spring 1991 issue brought back my recent memories of 1987-89 discussions in Washington on the subject. As head of the Amphibious and Prepositioning Requirements Section, Operations Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, I sat in on many a study group and, together with my colleagues, represented the Commandant’s interests in what was a key bone of contention between the Congress and the Department of the Navy. Essentially, the legislative guidance called for extensive investigations of the sealift requirements of the U.S., present programs and alternative technologies—especially fast sealift designs—to improve on existing shortfalls.

The interdepartmental study groups and advisory committees that formed during those years all saw various minefields which prevented an accurate report of their truly frank and revealing deliberations. Requirement forecasting inevitably hinged on the Central European reinforcement, least likely but most demanding. Logisticians pleaded for aggressive exploration of all solutions, Congress relayed shipbuilders’ and designers’ preferences for both conventional and high-tech designs, OpNav pleaded for funding by the commercial sector and MarAd to conserve starving gray-bottom programs, and NavSea pushed for its on-the-shelf ship designs (generally improved SL-7s) vice adventuresome speculation in surface-effects and other technologies, which they conservatively baptized with a 21-year R&D cycle.

Let me elaborate upon a few points of the Gibson-Shuford essay which are, I think, deserving of further development:

The airlift corollary remains elusive. The C-17 is an advanced design and a testimonial to the excellence of the industry. The major problem is that it has little specific justification at its level of expense. It's difficult to see how the C-17 could have outperformed the C-130/C-141/C-5 force. The tactical field requirement was not used, nor were oversized loads such as main battle tanks flown into the zone. Indeed, the economics of transporting a tank to the Gulf War by literally strapping four jet engines on it remained absurd. Nor are other cargos likely to be validated for airlift vice sealift. I flew to the U.S. from Spain early this year in a C-5 carrying retrograde material after the campaign concluded: spare C-5 engines and packaged lubricating oil were the cargo requiring this expensive sortie. The specific urgencies of cargos which cannot qualify for cheaper but slower sealift are rarely demonstrated.

The shortage of mariners and the difficulty of upkeep of an unused sealift capacity are not to be countered by the persistent fantasy of a revived U.S. Merchant Marine. The American ship and crew have priced themselves into oblivion and the political will and national treasure required to alter that reality do not exist.

Pushing cargos through the seas on displacement hulls powered by steam plants probably reached its apogee in execution with the excellent SL-7 conversions. I was interested that the authors' study found reliability still a problem and the oft-advertised sustained speeds unattained.

Perhaps the solutions to the above problems would be non-ships crewed by non-mariners. Surface-effect and other designs of the required military capacity are not commercially feasible. Yet they could be laid up on dry land and operated by crews largely composed of landlubbers drawn from an automotive and aircraft-oriented economy. Army and Naval Reserve cadres could play a role therein and a mission-modular approach could even permit their use as amphibious or combat replenishment ships when not performing a rapid reinforcement mission.

Foreign flag and flag of convenience shipping remains the bane of the planners and made/operated-in-USA enthusiasts. Yet these fleets have served us well in every war and crisis of the century. The fantasies of "go it alone" or of shipping driven into hiding by narrowly focused or unpopular U.S. campaigns simply runs against the nature of the American way of war and realistic planning parameters. Wars draw shippers like magnets, seeking sure profits, full utilization, and indemnification of losses, many times of obsolete or unprofitable assets.

Nobody has yet attacked the Alice in Wonderland thinking ("wishful" thinking seems an understatement) of the generation of "planners" groomed by all the services to flesh out the details of the deployment plans. Nobody who participated in loading and offloading of ships and aircraft while in the ground force units could possibly have believed the hopelessly optimistic views of marshalling, embarkation, transit, offload, and assembly times. Yet "C+Y" was consistently presented to the CinC as force closure time for units then expected to be ready

for employment. The good fortune of having a complacent enemy to deploy against in Desert Shield should provide sufficient evidence to the contrary to permit modified views of deployment conditions which remain only marginally changed from the Second World War.

Take care in evaluating afloat prepositioning. The authors do not explain why the Diego Garcia "prepo" ships took ten days to arrive "after call-up" (p. 11). In our zest to pronounce the operation a success, we may also be overlooking serious pitfalls of offloading such commercial ships directly into a potential combat zone, where combat unit commanders can shatter normal offload/assembly processes by shanghaiing equipment and by other acts of panic or combat exigency. Early introduction of service troops, not combat troops, is the key to theater buildup. The thin line protecting the Saudi frontier did not afford, apparently, the measure of security necessary for a proper beginning. Anyway, the shortage of active-duty offload and transportation units in the U.S. forces will force us to deploy mostly to secure allied ports and airfields over a fairly large time frame. Merely increasing prepositioning alone may not generate more rapid closure times.

Kenneth W. Estes
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Replying for the authors:

Sir,

Good comment. However, to date no one has been able to develop a surface effect craft of sufficient size to make it a feasible transporter of several thousand tons of cargo over long distances.

Andrew E. Gibson
Newport, Rhode Island

Douglas Southall Freeman and Modern War

Sir,

I would like to express a few words about your reprint of the speech by Douglas Southall Freeman concerning the memory of Robert E. Lee. As a young man reared in a Virginia military academy from the age of thirteen, and as an Army officer commissioned from the University of Virginia, it meant a great deal to me. For good reason, Lee has always been one of my heroes.

It has been stated many times that the Civil War was the first truly “modern” war, in that railroads, telegraphs, repeating rifles, aerial balloons, and armored combatant ships were employed. It was modern in another unfortunate sense as well: Sherman’s march to the sea (as a practical demonstration of Clausewitz’s concept of “total war,” “without feelings of humanity”) was a precursor of even greater atrocities to come in the 20th Century. (I don’t know if Sherman read Clausewitz, but his actions speak for themselves.)

However, mercifully, the Civil War was “backward” in at least one respect: the leadership of both armies, especially Lee, believed in forbearance, humanity, mercy, and gentlemanly conduct, Sherman excepted.

I derive great pride and satisfaction in knowing that we did not fight our latest “modern” war (of which I am a veteran) according to the amoral principles of Clausewitz, as practiced by Sherman, but honorably, according to Lee’s timeless convictions and the Laws of Land Warfare.

Let Sherman and Clausewitz go into the “dustbin of history.” We, however, should continue to follow the moral leadership of Robert E. Lee.

William M. Shaw II
Major, U.S. Army

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CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

The United States Air Force Academy will hold the Fifteenth Military History Symposium, “A Revolutionary War: Korea and the Transformation of the Post-War World,” 14-16 October 1992. For further information contact: Captain T.N. Castle, HQ USAFA/DFH, U.S.A.F. Academy, Colo., 80840-5701 or phone (719) 472-3230.

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